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Craig Savage

## ‘Why must you criticize?’

### Introductory notes and acknowledgements

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**Craig Savage** is a PhD candidate at the University of Bristol. His thesis is provisionally entitled *‘I got the blood of the land in my voice’: American Landscapes in the Lyrics of Bob Dylan*. Along with Daniel Karlin he was the convener of *The Seven Ages of Dylan*, an academic conference held to celebrate and investigate the work of Bob Dylan as the artist turned seventy. He is the editor of this collection of essays.

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A ‘critic’, ‘just by the sound of the word, seems a negative thing’ said Bob Dylan in an interview with Matt Damsker in 1978. It’s the kind of retort we’ve heard before, and since, in a fifty-year career that has spanned over thirty studio albums from *The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan* (1962) to *Tempest* (2012). This and similar remarks—resistant, evasive—have often been used to draw a line of consistency through the otherwise shifting inventions and reinventions that have marked the different phases of Dylan’s output from folksinger to born-again Christian, androgynous hipster to southern gentleman. Yet if Dylan is a master of *deflection*, then the art of *reflection* is an inextricable part of that: in the same breath as Dylan dismisses the critic here, he admits a mode of self-criticism: it’s not ‘the sound’ or ‘the word’ that matters, but ‘the sound of the word’.

This kind of self-reflection is an equally important constituent of the songs. We might think, for example, of ‘Changing of the Guards’ from *Street Legal* (1978). The song is one of transition: it marks both a new beginning (since the track is the first on the album) and, as the title suggests, a beginning *again*, the shifting of one kind of order—perhaps one kind of Dylan—in favour of another. Yet ‘Changing of the Guards’ is a song as much about the backward glance as it is the forward push. The opening lines, ‘Sixteen years | Sixteen banners united over the fields’, take us back over the previous sixteen years of Dylan’s recording career, and the ‘sixteen banners’, the sixteen original albums he produced in that time. The lines suggest both that the albums are a collected body of work—‘banners united’—and that they are the standards, in the double sense, by which Dylan’s art is recognized and measured. Right at the point of renewal, at the point of slipping, once more, beyond

our reach, Dylan offers his hand to invite critical reflection. (By way of a further example, the working title for this special issue of *Popular Music History* was 'Conclusions on the Wall', the half line of 'Love Minus Zero / No Limit', until I belatedly discovered someone else had got there first.<sup>1</sup> But, of course, we cannot now think of that line without also thinking of another line from another first track: 'The writing's on the wall, come read it, come see what it say'.<sup>2</sup>)

This collection is made up of critics who have accepted just such an invitation. The edition begins with David Boucher's discussion of Dylan's inaugurating moment of invention, his name. Daniel Karlin and Katharine Peddie take up, at different points and in different contexts, the subject of Allen Ginsberg's mediating influence on Dylan, while Gary Browning examines the issue of influence itself and how it informs Dylan's practice. Two of the essayists consider distinct periods of Dylan's career: John Hughes examines his born-again Christian phase, whereas Mike Jones appraises the years under the management of Albert Grossman. There are also thematic contributions: the first, by Robert McColl, makes connections between American space and how Dylan constructs the lines of particular songs; and the second, from David Punter, gives an anatomy of the concept of 'pity' and some of the ways in which Dylan interacts with such an emotion. The edition closes with a review by Neil Corcoran that, in the light of two recent studies on Dylan, considers how we might legitimately engage with, and respond to, Dylan's art.

Let me express my thanks to those involved in the preparation of this edition and the three conferences that gave occasion for the work collected here. With regard to the conferences, my thanks are due to the organizers of 'Refractions of Bob Dylan' at the University of Vienna, and to the University of Bristol Alumni Fund for the research grant that enabled my attendance in Austria; to David Boucher and Sarah Gallimore of the University of Cardiff for their efforts in staging 'Bob's Birthday Bash: Bob Dylan at Seventy', and for kindly supporting my attendance there; and to Daniel Karlin, Sam Barlow, Cheryl Slater and Pam King for their work in organizing 'The Seven Ages of Dylan' at my own university, which was generously funded by the Bristol Institute for Research in the Humanities and Arts, the Churchill Fund and the Department of English.

As for the issue at hand, my first debt of gratitude belongs to David Boucher and Mike Jones for giving me the opportunity to act as its editor. I am grateful too to the members of the review board—Aidan Day, Andrew Gamble, Hugh

1. 'Love Minus Zero / No Limit' is from *Bringing It All Back Home* (Columbia Records, 1965); Elizabeth Thompson anticipated me by some thirty-odd years with her 1980 edition *Conclusions on the Wall: New Essays on Bob Dylan* (Manchester: Thin Man).

2. 'Thunder on the Mountain', *Modern Times* (Columbia Records, 2006).

Haughton, Ralph Pite, Nicholas Roe and Sean Wilentz, Christopher Gair, Lee Marshall, Laurence Publicover, Constantine Sandis and Reza Taher-Kermani—each of whom have helped shape the critical scope of this edition. Further thanks must also go to Rob Strachan, Andy Lineham and Dave Laing at *Popular Music History*: to the two former for their early involvement, but, especially, to the latter for his oversight and encouragement in bringing this work to fruition. With this present endeavour, as with all things academic, Daniel Karlin has guided me along the way, righting my course when I strayed, calling me on when I faltered, and lighting the road ahead when all seemed dark.

My most gracious thanks are reserved for this edition's contributors *sine qua non*.